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**Bombay before Bollywood: the history and significance of  
fantasy and stunt film genres in Bombay cinema of the pre-  
Bollywood era**

**Thomas, K.**

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**BOMBAY BEFORE BOLLYWOOD:**  
THE HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF  
FANTASY AND STUNT FILM GENRES  
IN BOMBAY CINEMA OF THE PRE-BOLLYWOOD ERA

KATHARINE ROSEMARY CLIFTON THOMAS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University Of Westminster  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Published Work

September 2016

## **Abstract**

This PhD by Published Work comprises nine essays and a 10,000-word commentary. Eight of these essays were published (or republished) as chapters within my monograph *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies*, which aimed to outline the contours of an alternative history of twentieth-century Bombay cinema. The ninth, which complements these, was published in an annual reader. This project eschews the conventional focus on India's more respectable genres, the so-called 'socials' and 'mythologicals', and foregrounds instead the 'magic and fighting films' – the fantasy and stunt genres – of the B- and C-circuits in the decades before and immediately after India's independence. Drawing on an extensive body of my own field research that has spanned more than three decades, the essays also indicate how the visceral attractions of these fantastical B- and C-circuit films migrated into Bombay's mainstream A-circuit cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. The project draws on and analyses a variety of archival traces – from silent film fragments, shooting scripts, newspaper advertisements, memoirs, posters and publicity stills to full-length movies, gossip and my own ethnographic field-notes from the 1980s and early 1990s. The project's central argument is that the B- and C-circuit 'magic and fighting' films were more significant than has previously been recognised: (i) they influenced the development of film form in India throughout the decades, and especially in the 1970s/80s 'masala' era; (ii) they engaged with modernity just as much as – but in different ways from – the A-grade socials in the pre- and early post-independence era. I conclude that alongside nationalist orthodoxies, this significant stream of Bombay cinema has always revelled in cultural hybridity, borrowing voraciously from global popular culture and engaging with transcultural flows of cosmopolitan modernity and postmodernity.

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### List of Accompanying Material

A hard copy of my book *Bombay before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies* accompanies this commentary.

The additional article (essay nine) is included as an appendix within this commentary.

### Author's Declaration

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Katharine Rosemary Clifton Thomas

September 2016

## **1. MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR CONSIDERATION FOR PHD**

### (a) MONOGRAPH (eight chapters)

***Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies***, first published by Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, November 2013, ISBN 978-81-250-5362 and republished by SUNY Press, New York, March 2015.

This is a single-authored book, comprising ten chapters (plus two introductions - one to each of part of the book). Eight chapters (82,000 words) are either based on articles/essays published since 2005 or are completely new and previously unpublished.

Two chapters (chapters 8 and 9: 17,000 words) are based on work first published before 2005 and ***should therefore be ignored for the purpose of this PhD***, given the University of Westminster's ten-year rule for PhDs by published work.

### (b) ADDITIONAL ARTICLE

Thomas, Rosie, 'Miss Frontier Mail: The Film that Mistook its Star for a Train' in Monica Narula, Shuuhabrata Sengupta, Jeebesh Bagshi and Ravi Sundaram (eds.), ***Sarai Reader 07: Frontiers***, Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2007, pp. 294-309. ISBN 81-901429-9-2,  
<http://archive.sarai.net/files/original/1870ef6d3e03c9ad88cc491a6bf2205d.pdf>

This article (c. 6500 words) relates directly to the body of research within the monograph. For pragmatic reasons (largely to do with space) I decided not to include it within the book, but it sits well alongside – and complements – the subject-matter and argument of the book. Henceforth, when I refer to 'the book' or 'the project' below, the reader should assume that I include this article (thereby avoiding the clumsy formulation 'the book and additional article' every time I mention them).

## **2. COMMENTARY: AIMS AND OVERVIEW**

### Aims and objectives

The monograph *Bombay Before Bollywood* aimed to outline the contours of an alternative history of twentieth-century Bombay cinema. Eschewing the conventional focus on India's more respectable genres, the so-called 'socials' and 'mythologicals', this account foregrounds the 'magic and fighting films' – the fantasy and stunt genres – of the B- and C-circuits<sup>1</sup> in the decades before and immediately after India's independence. Drawing on an extensive body of my own field research that has spanned more than three decades, the book also aimed to demonstrate how the visceral attractions of these fantastical B-circuit films migrated into Bombay's mainstream A-circuit cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. It does not aim to be a conventional history but makes its intervention by describing and analysing a series of moments and traces through which an alternative history 'from below' (i.e. through the frame of the 'lower genres'<sup>2</sup>) might be told.

### Research Questions

How does the history of Bombay cinema change when research attention focuses on the popular films of Bombay's B- and C-circuits (in particular 'fantasy' and 'stunt' films aimed at lower-class audiences)? What forms did these popular films take? In what ways did these films influence the film industry of the early 1980s? Each chapter poses – implicitly or explicitly – a subset of research questions in relation to its specific subject-matter.

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<sup>1</sup> I explain these terms in footnote 4, Chapter 1, of *Bombay Before Bollywood*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> The term used by Miriam Bratu Hansen, quoting Tsivian, to describe the adventure serials, detective thrillers and slapstick comedy genres that appealed primarily to working class audiences in the USA in the silent era (2000: 332-50).

### Original contribution to knowledge

The book offers a series of views of a potentially different – broader and more inclusive – history of Bombay cinema than has been usual, which takes account of fantasy and stunt films pre-1993. It provides detailed analyses and case studies of a selection of films and filmmakers that, *at the time of original publication of each individual chapter*, had been more or less ignored in previous scholarship on Indian cinema. Its central argument is that, alongside nationalist orthodoxies, a significant stream of Bombay cinema has always revelled in cultural hybridity, borrowing voraciously from global popular culture and engaging with transcultural flows of cosmopolitan modernity and postmodernity.

### Methodology

My project set out to excavate facets of Bombay film history that had not previously been recognized in any significant way within the academic literature. Scarcity of research resources has been a perennial problem for scholars in Indian cinema history, as I discuss in Chapter 1. The project draws on a variety of archival traces gathered laboriously, and somewhat serendipitously, in the field over the years, from public and private archives (such as NFAI and Wadia Movietone) and newspaper and library research, to my own collection of street and cinema ephemera, as well as interviews and participant observation. These traces include silent film fragments, shooting scripts, newspaper advertisements, memoirs, posters and publicity stills as well as full-length movies, gossip and my own ethnographic field-notes from the 1980s and early 1990s. My methods of dealing with my field materials have changed over the years to reflect the range of topics I have studied but have primarily involved intertextual analysis of films, film stars, film studios, film lobby cards, stills and posters, and description of institutional and interpersonal relationships through which films were financed in the 1980s. Methods specific to each chapter are described in section 5 below.



### **3. THE PROCESS**

The book emerged out of a body of research on Bombay cinema that I carried out – on and off – over a period of 35 years. The chapters are organised as a broadly chronological alternative history of Bombay cinema, although the research for Part Two – and the writing of two of those chapters - was mostly done in the 1980s and early 1990s, while the research and writing of Part One (and the introductory chapter 1) has all taken place since 2003.

#### **Phase 1: 1979-93 (Part Two of book)**

My interest in Indian cinema – and my research for much of what became Chapters 7 to 10 of this book – began in 1979 when, as a PhD student in social anthropology at the London School of Economics, I set out for Bombay on what was intended to be a classic fieldwork experience. I wanted to understand how the Bombay filmmakers conceptualised what they were doing, how conditions of production impacted on their filmmaking, and how the films emerged from – and were read within – an intertextual field. I spent three months in Pune adjusting to India and gaining a grounding in my topic at the National Film Archive of India and the Film and Television Institute of India. I then spent 17 months in Bombay, living in Bandra, the neighbourhood of choice for many film industry people, visiting film sets, music recording studios, production offices, post-production suites, scriptwriting sessions, trade journal offices, film parties and suchlike, as well as watching films in the cinemas and discussing Hindi cinema with anyone I could. As I describe in my contextual review section below, this was an overly ambitious ethnographic project and, inevitably, I floundered. However, I brought back a wealth of material that I spent much of the next few years attempting to make sense of, publishing some of it in journals within the discipline of film studies (including early versions of Chapters 8 and 9). Over this period, until around 1993, I kept abreast of developments in the Bombay film industry from London, largely through correspondence with and visits from friends in Bombay, but also through watching films via the then burgeoning VHS industry, as well as my professional involvement in sourcing Hindi films for Channel Four. I also made occasional return trips to Bombay, notably in the context

of research for the television programmes that I was by then producing, and each time I added to my already extensive stack of fieldnotes. When I began to assess this backlog of material in 2012, in the context of writing this book, I discovered two areas in which my early research could still make an original contribution to knowledge; Chapter 7 (on film industry finance) and Chapter 10 (on the Sanjay Dutt saga) were produced out of this material.

#### Phase 2, 2003-2013 (Part One of book + additional essay)

I returned to academic research on Indian cinema around 2003. By this point Indian cinema studies was beginning to emerge as a distinct field and I was amazed to discover that a number of my earlier journal articles, including one published in *Screen* in 1985 (Chapter 8) and another in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* in 1989 (Chapter 9), were now considered seminal texts. Having left the field because, amongst other reasons, there had been almost no one with whom to engage in dialogue, I now had the luxury of returning to an exciting new cohort of scholars and a renewed sense of optimism about the potential and importance of the discipline. As work on the then current Bombay film industry was already in process by others, I decided that the most appropriate contribution I could make would be to draw on my earlier ethnographic fieldwork and interviews I had gathered as research for television documentaries in the 1980s. Fearless Nadia and her producers, the Wadia brothers, offered the ideal starting point: not only had I met and interviewed both brothers in the early 1980s – and watched Homi Wadia making his final film in Basant studios in 1980 – but I had also filmed interviews with Mary Evans (Fearless Nadia) and her husband Homi in 1986 for a Channel Four documentary that my production company had been commissioned to make. For complicated institutional reasons that film never went ahead, although my company was later in dialogue with J.B.H. Wadia's grandson Riyad Wadia in the 1990s, who made a documentary on his great aunt, Fearless Nadia, in 1993. We helped to develop a script with him for a feature film on Nadia, which also failed to materialise due to his tragic premature death in 2003. My own interest in this topic never wavered and, in 2003, Fearless Nadia and the Wadias emerged as the perfect focus for my return to academic writing, as they fed into a number of then current concerns, notably the issue of transcultural cinema histories. 'Not Quite Pearl White' (Chapter 4) and 'Zimbo and

Son' (Chapter 5) were published in 2005, both drawing primarily on the backlog of material I had gathered on the Wadias and their films.

Writing these made clear that the subject needed more research. Not only was it urgent to interview the Wadias' few surviving co-workers and audience members while they were still alive, but also a wealth of material remained in a number of archives, including films and documents that Riyad Wadia had accumulated at the Wadia Movietone archive. Funded by a British Academy grant and a short AHRB fellowship, as well as sabbatical time from University of Westminster, I returned to India for a few months of fieldwork in 2005. The essay 'Miss Frontier Mail' (submitted here as 'additional article') and the chapter on *Lal-e-Yaman* (Chapter 3) drew on this body of research. While I had intended that these chapters would contribute to a book on Fearless Nadia and the Wadias already commissioned by Duke University Press, my research focus became distracted at this point. Encounters at a conference in Abu Dhabi organised by Rachel Dwyer, where I was presenting on *Lal-e-Yaman*, led me to recognise another important field that had been ignored to date. My attention turned to the history of Indian fantasy films and the Islamicate ethos within those films. I was invited to contribute to two projects: Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen's Islamicate cinema conference and edited book, and Philip Kennedy and Marina Warner's conference and book project on the global circulation of the *Arabian Nights*. Writing for these necessitated a whole new body of primary research. 'Thieves of the Orient' (Chapter 2) and 'Still Magic' (Chapter 6) are among its results.

By 2012, I recognised that I had a body of material, either published or in process, that would work together as a book. The introductory essay to this monograph, 'Bombay Before Bollywood' (Chapter 1), was my opportunity to extend and complete this project. Featuring an additional body of archival research on fantasy and stunt films in the 1950s to consolidate my hypotheses, this process helped me to understand how the different chapters spoke to each other across the years and how the themes drew together into the arguments of the book.

#### **4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE PROJECT (in brief)**

Several interrelated arguments emerged and, for a detailed exposition, I refer the reader to pages 7- 20 of *Bombay Before Bollywood*. They can be summarised as follows:

1. Indian cinema history needs to be told in a more complex and nuanced way, and through more and different stories, with proper attention given to the B- and C-circuit ‘magic and fighting’ films – and the influence they had – throughout this history.
2. The B- and C-circuit ‘magic and fighting’ films were more significant than has been previously recognised: (i) they influenced the development of film form in India throughout the decades, and especially in the 1970s/80s ‘masala’ era; (ii) they engaged with modernity just as much as – but in different ways from – the A-grade socials.
3. The earlier academic emphasis on nationalist sensibilities in Indian cinema history needs to be complemented by a recognition of Indian cinema’s connectedness with world cinema and culture throughout the decades, not just its exotic difference.

These arguments are qualified by the following provisos: all genres overlap; no era is monolithic; change and continuity coexist, as do similarities and differences between films and eras.

## **5. DISCUSSION OF INDIVIDUAL ESSAYS: arguments, results, methods and original contribution to knowledge**

I am submitting these eight chapters in the form in which they were finally published as a book in 2013 (together with one additional article from 2007) because here the argument has been honed and repetitions across different essays deleted. However, the original contributions to knowledge of each essay need to be understood in the context of the year they were first published, which for five of these essays was much earlier (two in 2005; one in 2007; two in 2011). Before moving on to a general contextual review, I will therefore outline the arguments and their original contributions to knowledge essay by essay below.

### **CHAPTER 1. Bombay Before Bollywood.**

First published in *Bombay Before Bollywood*, Orient Blackswan, 2013. [9060 words].

**SUMMARY:** Chapter One argues that Bombay's fantasy and action films should be re-evaluated: I produce new evidence for the importance of fantasy films throughout the pre- and early post-independence decades, especially in the 1950s. I also assert that histories of Bombay cinema should recognise cultural hybridity as well as nationalist essentialism, and continuities as well as change. The chapter synthesizes, in a new argument (see section 4 above), a body of research I had undertaken over the previous three decades.

**ORIGINALITY:** In addition to the overarching argument, which was a novel synthesis of a number of threads, the chapter put into the public domain a body of new knowledge about the popularity of B-movie fantasy films in the 1950s.

**METHODS:** While most of this chapter is an overview of existing literature and my own writings, bringing these together into a new argument, my archive research into the box-office popularity of fantasy films in each era – and especially in the 1950s – drew on original film industry trade journal research as well as information gathered during my fieldwork in Bombay in the 1980s.

## CHAPTER 2. Thieves of the Orient: The Arabian Nights in early Indian cinema

Simultaneously published in *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies*, 2013 and in

Philip Kennedy and Marina Warner (eds.), *Scheherazade's Children: Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights*, New York: New York University Press, 2013. [12,650 words]

**SUMMARY:** This essay is an overview of the 'oriental genre' in early Indian cinema. It focuses on how the tales of the *Arabian Nights* circulated – and were adapted – in the early twentieth century and explores how orientalism played out within India. Tracing curious cultural borrowings across the interconnected paths of twentieth-century Indian and Euro-American orientalist theatre, film, dance and variety entertainment, the essay suggests that the *Arabian Nights* became, somewhat paradoxically, a signifier of cosmopolitan modernity in 1920s and 1930s India. Kohinoor's silent fantasy *Gul-e-Bakavali* (Kanjibhai Rathod, 1924), Wadia Movietone's *Lal-e-Yaman* (J.B.H. Wadia, 1933) and *Noor-e-Yaman* (J.B.H. Wadia, 1935), and, from Calcutta, Madhu Bose's *AliBaba* (1937) illustrate how films drew eclectically on both transcultural orientalist trends and on local traditions. I suggest that the so-called Islamicate was India's preferred orientalist mode.

**ORIGINALITY:** The essay brought together, for the first time, the most recent *Arabian Nights* scholarship and Indian film scholarship, and made original contributions to both. This was the first research to trace the *Arabian Nights*' influence in Indian cinema in any detail. It was also the first writing to engage in any academic depth with the question of orientalism within Indian cinema. Additionally, it argues that not only may India's first feature film have been an *Arabian Nights* story, but also that India may have produced the world's first *Arabian Nights* film footage, a point that had not been recognised before.

**METHODS:** This 12,600-word essay involved months of background research on performance forms in late nineteenth/early twentieth-century India via newspaper archives, family photo albums, memoirs and suchlike, as well as archival research on early Indian cinema. It also involved secondary research on the *Arabian Nights*' circulation at that period in India, and on writers from – and conventions of – Parsi

theatre and their influence on early Indian cinema. It also drew on British colonial records as well as (conflicting) filmographies of the silent era, including Bengali sources on Hiralal Sen, and a shooting script of a silent fantasy film (*Gul-e-Bakavali*), at that time recently discovered by Virchand Dharamsey.

### **CHAPTER 3. Distant Voices, Magic Knives: Lal-e-Yaman and the Transition to Sound in Bombay Cinema**

This was originally published in Rachel Dwyer and Jerry Pinto (eds.), *Beyond the Boundaries of Bollywood: The Many Forms of Hindi Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 53-76. [9600 words: the original version was 10,200 words]

**SUMMARY:** This essay offers a close reading of the fantasy film *Lal-e-Yaman* (J. B. H. Wadia, 1933), one of the earliest and most successful Indian sound films to have survived. It argues that the film is, at its core, structured around an opposition between the visual and the aural in which the power of the voice prevails over the illusory qualities of the visual – an allegory of the arrival of the Talkies, I suggest. The argument draws on Michel Chion's notion of the acousmatic (disembodied) voice to demonstrate the sophistication of Wadia's ways of presenting divine voices (in comparison with his better known rivals at Prabhat Studios). I compare this film with Wadia's penultimate silent film, *Vantolio* (Whirlwind, Homi Wadia, 1933), to contrast what I suggest are two different modes of subaltern cosmopolitan modernity, both increasingly disparaged in public discourse as the 1930s progressed. I note that the film's Islamicate setting may have contributed to its being dismissed by critics at the time of its release.

**ORIGINALITY:** This essay was the first and to date, as far as I know, the only detailed account and analysis of *Lal-e-Yaman*.

**METHODS:** This 10,000-word essay draws on my AHRB-funded research at the Wadia Movietone archive. This includes analysis of first-hand accounts of Wadia's working methods via unpublished memoirs; newspaper accounts of the film's success and publicity; information on box-office takings via documents I had found

in Wadia Movietone offices; close textual analysis of these two Wadia films and comparison of these with others of the period.

#### **CHAPTER 4. Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, Queen of the Stunts**

A version of chapter four was originally published as ‘Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, Queen of the Stunts’ in Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha (eds.), *Bollyworld: Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, New Delhi, London: Sage, 2005, pp. 35-69. [11,550 words: the original version was 12,750 words]

**SUMMARY:** This essay is a study of Fearless Nadia, Bombay’s top box-office female star of the 1930s and 1940s, and her producers at Wadia Movietone. It examines the apparent paradox of a white European woman being celebrated as a feisty nationalist heroine. Contrasting Fearless Nadia with Bombay Talkies’ Devika Rani, the other major 1930s female star, I suggest that Nadia’s success was best understood in the context of the *viraangana* (warrior woman) motif which circulated widely in early twentieth-century Indian popular culture as a way of subverting British censorship of references to the independence movement. Using *Diamond Queen* (Homi Wadia, 1940) as an example, the essay argues that Nadia’s persona is usefully understood as a form of mimicry in reverse, to be viewed in the context of transnational flows of cinema distribution of the era.

**ORIGINALITY:** In 2005, when first published, this body of material on Nadia and Wadia Movietone was mostly new to academic discourse and challenged the conventional historiography. Fearless Nadia and Wadia Movietone studio had effectively been relegated to little more than a footnote in the Indian cinema story, apart from a short section in an essay I had myself co-authored on three Indian stars in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (1991). My 2005 essay included the first published academic analysis of any Wadia Movietone film.

The essay has been extensively cited and also republished in *Exporting Perilous Pauline: Pearl White and the Serial Film Craze*, ed. Marina Dahlquist, University of Illinois Press, 2013; and in *Women Contesting Culture: Changing Frames of Gender*



*Politics in India*, Kavita Panjabi and Paromita Chakravarti (eds.), Kolkata: Bhatkal and Sen, 2012.

METHODS: The essay draws on my own interviews with the two stars and their filmmakers, on Wadia family documentation, and on close textual analysis of one key film, *Diamond Queen* (1940), to examine the construction of the Nadia persona.

### **CHAPTER 5. *Zimbo and Son Meet the Girl with a Gun***

A version of chapter five was originally published as ‘Zimbo and Son Meet the Girl with a Gun’ in David Blamey and Robert d’Souza (eds.) *Living Pictures: Perspectives on the Film Poster in India*, London: Open Editions Press, 2005, pp. 27-44. [8654 words: the original version was 9100 words].

SUMMARY. This essay was inspired by two 1960s film posters aimed at ‘C-grade’ audiences: *Zimbo and Son* (John Cavas, 1966) and *Khilari* (The Player, Homi Wadia, 1968), Indian versions of Tarzan and James Bond respectively. Through analysis of these posters in relation to an earlier film *Toofani Tarzan* (Homi Wadia, 1937) and comparison with Hollywood Tarzans, the essay shows how globally popular subject-matter was ‘Indianized’. I argue that Tarzan and James Bond had particular resonances for subaltern Indian audiences for whom notions of masculinity were under negotiation in the nationalist era. By the 1960s a game of mimicry and pastiche was being played with – and through – these references, with Basant recycling its own history to exploit two of its key brands, Fearless Nadia and John Cavas.

ORIGINALITY: When first published in 2005, the essay introduced to the academy new historical material on Basant Studios, the history of Tarzan films in Indian cinema, and the first textual analysis of one of the most popular, *Toofani Tarzan* (Homi Wadia, 1937), *Zimbo*’s direct predecessor. Citations of this essay include Kajri Jain (2007:406) and David Martin-Jones (*Deleuze Studies*, 2(1), 2008: 25-48).

METHODS: The essay was a contribution to an AHRB artists’ project on Indian cinema posters led by Blamey and d’Souza: contributors to the book were briefed to

respond to the artists' collection of visual ephemera and contextualise it. Research drew on my long term documentation of studio histories; original material on John Cavas (star of *Toofani Tarzan* and director of *Zimbo*) and Fearless Nadia (star of *Khilari*); detailed textual analysis of the two posters; and an overview of secondary sources in relation to the transnational popularity of Tarzan movies in the 1930s and 1960s.

## **CHAPTER 6. Still Magic: An Aladdin's Cave of 1950s B-Movie Fantasy**

A version of chapter six was originally published online in 2011 as 'Still Magic: An Aladdin's Cave of 1950s B Movie Fantasy' on the *Tasveerghar* website, edited by Sumathi Ramaswamy, Christiane Brosius, Yousuf Saeed.

<http://tasveerghar.net/cmsdesk/essay/103/>

It was subsequently selected for publication in the book *Visual Homes, Image Worlds: Essays from Tasveerghar – the House of Pictures*, eds. Christiane Brosius, Sumathy Ramaswamy and Yousuf Saeed, Delhi: Yoda Press, 2015. [6341 words: original version was 7400 words]

**SUMMARY:** This commissioned essay emerged from – and is structured as a response to – a collection of Indian popular visual ephemera (the Priya Paul collection at *Tasveer Ghar*, a digital archive of South Asian popular visual culture hosted by University of Heidelberg and Duke University). It was designed originally as a web-based visual essay, which focuses on stills from 1950s B-movie fantasy and action films. Spinning off from the half-dozen lobby cards displayed at *Tasveer Ghar* from Homi Wadia's 1952 fantasy film *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, the essay places these in the context of stills from other 1950s B-movies and alongside imagery as diverse as nineteenth-century textile labels, European travellers' postcards, matchbox covers, wrestling posters and calendar art. The *Aladdin* cinema-lobby cards were used as the core around which the essay was structured and evolved. Each of its five sections explores a different thematic set of relationships between film stills (from this and other 1950s B-movies) and other elements of Indian popular visual culture.

**ORIGINALITY:** In part, the originality of this essay lay in its exploration of the

form of the visual essay, in which the structure was led by connections between images, not verbal arguments. This process is best understood by looking at the online version of the essay rather than the printed one, as this includes all 42 images. This was also the first published academic work on Indian fantasy films of the 1950s.

**METHODS:** The research process began with an exhaustive search through the archive's 4,500 images to select a shortlist of 50, out of which the structure of the essay and its arguments were developed. These 50 images (subsequently reduced to 42) uncovered a range of connections between Bombay's B-movie fantasy films of the 1950s and other visual ephemera. In contextualizing these visual fragments, the essay drew on my own original interviews with Aladdin's director, the late Homi Wadia, and on textual analysis of his 1952 film *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*. It also built on my substantial original research on other fantasy and stunt films of Indian cinema in the period between the 1920s and the 1950s (see Chapters 1 and 2 of my book), and my research on Indian popular visual and performance culture traditions.

## **CHAPTER 7: Where the Money Flows**

First published in *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies*, 2013. [15,142 words]

**SUMMARY:** Chapter seven is an overview of how Bombay film production was organised in the early 1980s, drawing on accounts from insiders that include 'secrets' of how financing, production and distribution operated at that time; the role of the laboratories in regulating an apparently anarchic system; and how personal power was negotiated within the industry. The chapter demonstrates that the way films were produced depended crucially on who the producer was. Moreover, I argue that, despite the apparent chaos, the system worked quite well for some of the more powerful players within it, however much it constrained the form of the films it produced.

**ORIGINALITY:** While my ethnographic fieldwork was unprecedented in the 1980s, by the time it was published in 2013 some of this material on the labyrinthine

structures of Bombay film finance had been covered in other publications, notably Tejaswini Ganti (2004 and 2012) and, to a lesser extent, Aswin Punathambekar (2013). However, both their accounts were focused on a period between the mid-1990s and 2012. My material is the only firsthand account of how the system worked in the early 1980s. Moreover, the key role of the laboratories in policing the system has never been revealed or discussed elsewhere.

**METHODS:** This draws on ethnographic material in my personal archive on Bombay's film industry of the early 1980s, collected over 20 months' fieldwork (1979-81) and ongoing subsequent engagement with film industry professionals over the following years.

## **CHAPTER 10: Mother India Maligned**

First published in *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies*, 2013. [9067 words]

**SUMMARY:** The final chapter updates the saga of Nargis and the Dutt family to the mid-1990s, the point at which India and the film industry began to change in significant ways. It provides a sequel to my much cited *Mother India* essay (originally published in 1989, Chapter 9 in this book) and sketches in the remarkable crossovers between real life and screen fiction – notably with *Sadak* (The Street, Mahesh Bhatt, 1991) and *Khalnayak* (The Villain, Subhash Ghai, 1993) – that allowed public debates about nationalist identities to continue through the figure of Nargis's son, Sanjay Dutt. I argue that by the early 1990s nationalist anxieties were being played out over a traumatised male, rather than female, body. In a brief coda I update this material to the present day, examining the star persona of Sanjay Dutt in 2012 via discussion of Dutt's performances in two recent films (*Aladin* 2009; *Agneepath* 2012), from which I trace a line back through the action, fantasy and masala films that have been the focus of this book. I speculate on the relationship between Dutt's appeal today and the visceral pleasures of early B-circuit fantasy and stunt films.

**ORIGINALITY:** Although there has been much journalistic interest in Sanjay Dutt

over the years, there had been no academic study of this star phenomenon by 2013 (nor since as far as I know), apart from Parama Roy (1998), who discusses him in the context of her own study of *Mother India* and Nargis Dutt (which builds on and acknowledges a debt to my 1989 essay). In turn I build on Roy's work but take her insights about Sanjay Dutt in a different direction. There have been no other published analyses of *Sadak*, and, although Mehta (2001, 2012) and others have written on *Khalnayak*, their main focus has been on censorship of the song *Choli ke Peeche Kya Hai*, and the role of the female star, Madhuri Dixit.

**METHODS:** The essay draws on ethnographic fieldwork, including analysis of gossip magazines, and interviews with Sanjay and Sunil Dutt for a television programme I produced in 1996. It also uses film textual analysis.

#### **ADDITIONAL PUBLICATION:**

##### **Miss Frontier Mail: The Film that Mistook its Star for a Train**

First published in *Sarai Reader 2007: Frontiers*, eds. Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2007.

<http://archive.sarai.net/files/original/1870ef6d3e03c9ad88cc491a6bf2205d.pdf>

[6515 words]

A shorter version was reprinted in *The Cinema of India*, ed. Lalitha Gopalan, London: Wallflower Press, 2010.

**SUMMARY:** Close textual analysis of *Miss Frontier Mail* (Homi Wadia, 1936), Fearless Nadia's second box-office success, demonstrates the film's engagement with issues of modernity, in which the concept of 'speed' plays a key role, both as the term around which the film's narrative and comedy tracks are organised, and as the main engine of its visceral appeal. Comparing *Miss Frontier Mail* with films of other genres released in 1936, and observing its production and exhibition contexts, I suggest the Wadias' films overtly lampooned the more pretentious, serious-minded 'socials' so beloved of the Congress Party elite, whilst being in their own way equally politically radical.

**ORIGINALITY:** As the first published academic analysis of this key comedy stunt film (and earliest surviving example of the genre), as well as the first to describe the history of female fighting heroines in the late silent era, the essay predates the publication of analyses of this film, of the star Fearless Nadia, and of silent era ‘avenging angel’ film heroines by Vitali (2008) and Majumdar (2009). At the time, it made an original intervention in Indian cinema studies, arguing that stunt and comedy genres had been ignored in earlier histories (which focused on melodrama), and that the significance of such stunt films as a space of subaltern engagement with the contradictions of a modernising India needed to be re-evaluated. The essay built a strong case for the pan-Indian box-office success of *Miss Frontier Mail* and Fearless Nadia’s other 1930s films, as well as pointing out, for the first time, the fact that there was a precedent of female fighting film heroines in India’s silent era.

**METHODS:** Alongside textual analysis, the essay drew on close study of the cinema pages of the *Bombay Chronicle* and *Hindustan Times* of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as promotional material and box-office figures from the Wadia Movietone studio archives. It involved archive research in Mumbai, London and Cambridge.

## **6. COMMENTARY: CONTEXTUAL REVIEW**

As all chapters are extensively footnoted, my reference points within the disciplinary fields with which this thesis engages are clearly set out in the book itself. It would seem excessive to repeat these at any length here. Instead, I will briefly sketch out – in broad brushstrokes – the state of play of Indian cinema scholarship at each of the key points that these articles were written and published (2005, 2011 and 2013), as well as the period of original fieldwork (1979-81), in order to contextualise my research within each era and to illustrate how my argument built upon – and contributed to – the debates at the time.

### **The early 1980s**

When I undertook my original fieldwork in 1979-81, there had been no academic study of mainstream Indian cinema, apart from one key – and invaluable – guide to the field: Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy's *Indian Film* (first published in 1963; second edition in 1980). Without this book my undertaking would have been truly daunting and probably impossible. Two important journal issues were published during the time I was on fieldwork: a special edition of *India International Centre Quarterly* (1981) and *Cinema Vision India*, launched in 1980. Apart from these, and Panna Shah's unpublished PhD thesis from 1950, no academic writing dealt with India's mainstream Hindi language industry. Journalistic accounts were therefore extremely useful: Firoze Rangoonwalla's *Seventy-five Years of Indian Cinema* (1975) and *Indian Cinema: Past and Present* (1982), together with both his and B.V. Dharap's filmographies, offered invaluable reference points in a world before Google and IMDB.

Looking back at the task I had set myself in 1979 – and had been allowed to take on – it is not surprising that I was overwhelmed. I went to research the largest film industry in the world, with vast networks of workers and a history of film production dating back almost 70 years, but I arrived in Bombay with conceptual and methodological tools more appropriate to studying ritual or kinship structures within a small village. I had no prior knowledge of filmmaking anywhere in the world; I had very basic knowledge of a somewhat Sanskritised Hindi; I had seen no more than a

dozen or so Hindi films – all without subtitles; I had only standard anthropological knowledge of Indian culture and social conventions, few contacts in Bombay, and there were no VHSs or DVDs available in that era – let alone subtitled ones – nor was there any effective archiving of popular film. Moreover, I had no precedents to build upon. It was an absurdly ambitious task. I proceeded to dip in and out of what I could find on the ground, making contacts and choosing films to watch serendipitously. On the positive side, as a young English woman and the first anthropologist in the Bombay film industry, I was regarded as something of a curiosity and could therefore negotiate extraordinary access to almost anyone I wished to meet. Of the material submitted for this PhD thesis, only Chapter 7 draws primarily on that period of participant observation fieldwork.

On my return to London, I floundered. It took me years to understand the material I had collected. It also took years for British social anthropology to recognise visual and media cultures as a viable area of study and research (importantly through the work of Christopher Pinney), although several members of my LSE thesis writing group were very supportive at the time. However, I found interest in my research from the field of film studies – at the time a comparatively new and open discipline. Debates on genre (notably Stephen Neale, 1980) and on stardom (Richard Dyer, 1979) provided key theoretical framing for my first two published articles (chapters 8 and 9), although I struggled to find an appropriate framing for a thesis to be submitted within an anthropology department. If anything, my fieldwork experience raised broader questions about the nature of ethnographic research and the anthropological endeavour in the contemporary world, concerns that would be dealt with much more articulately some years later by anthropologists such as George Marcus and James Clifford (1986) and by the group around the journal *Public Culture*, launched by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge in 1988, to whose project I contributed in the early 1990s.

## **2005**

By the time I returned to research and writing on Bombay cinema in the early 2000s, after almost a decade of work in television production, much had changed. Although any researcher still faced the enduring problem of the scarcity of surviving prints or



documentation of Indian cinema history, there had been considerable progress. A key intervention was the publication in 1994 of the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, edited by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willeman (second edition 1999), a ground-breaking achievement that finally began to draw together, with considerable authority, reliable information on the different cinemas of India, including popular Hindi cinema. The other major publication of 1994 was *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema, 1912-1934*, edited by film historian and archivist Suresh Chabria, with articles by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and others, as well as a definitive filmography of the silent era by Virchand Dharamsey. From the early 1980s to the mid 1990s debates on Indian cinema in the context of Third Cinema, nationalism, frontality and the darshanic gaze were running in journals such as *Journal of Arts and Ideas* and *Framework*, involving Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Ravi Vasudevan and Gita Kapur, amongst others, and these mainly set the scene for academic discussion of Bombay cinema within India in that era, including its focus on exploring the parameters of a 'national' and indeed 'nationalist' cinema. There were also a number of early studies of the cinemas of South India, from Theodore Bhaskaran's *The Message Bearers: Nationalist Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India*, (1981) to Sarah Dickey's *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (1993), which were important but more or less peripheral to my focus on Bombay/Hindi cinema.

Two significant books of the 1990s extended the scholarly attention to Bombay cinema, national identity and the nation state. Sumita Chakravarty's *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987* (1993) and M. Madhava Prasad's *The Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Reconstruction* (1998), began to engage more deeply with popular Hindi film and its form. They were followed by two edited collections, Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney (eds), *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Popular Culture in India* (2000) and Ravi Vasudevan's *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (2000), both based on the proceedings of conferences held in the mid-1990s that brought the new group of scholars together and began to establish the field.

A spate of books followed, most of them approaching Bombay cinema either through the relationships between cinema, society and ideology or through examination of visual culture and cinephilia. These include Rachel Dwyer's *All You Want is Money*,

*All You Need is Love*, (2000); Vijay Mishra's *Bollywood: Temples of Desire* (2002); Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel's *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*, (2002); Lalitha Gopalan's *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (2002); Jyotika Viridi's *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Cinema as Social History* (2003); Manjunath Pendakur's *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology and Consciousness* (2003) and Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake's *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change* (1998; 2004). All engaged primarily with the then contemporary film industries or with historical contexts that focused on the mainstream 'respectable' socials and mythologicals, and all were more attuned to Indian cinema's differences from Hollywood than their crossovers with other world cinemas.

When I began writing on the Wadias and Fearless Nadia for my 2005 essays, one of my intentions was to challenge accounts of Indian cinema history that privileged the 'reputable' genres (mythologicals and socials) within a nation state framework, although I was blithely unaware of two research projects that had to some extent done this, largely because neither had been published in the UK or India. One was Dorothee Wenner's journalistic book in German on Fearless Nadia, *Zorro's blonde Schwester* (1999, translated into English and republished in India late in 2005), which in fact drew closely on some of the same sources that Riyad Wadia had shared with me. However, Wenner did not interrogate or research these sources further, nor did she recognize that many of Riyad's 'facts' were unreliable, nor offer any academic framing or analysis.

The other work was Kaushik Bhaumik's D. Phil. thesis (2001), a detailed historical account of Bombay cinema, 1913-1936, which included material on Wadia Movietone as well as other stunt filmmakers, some of which duplicated research I had also been doing. The thesis was impressively rich and is important, although some of the research needed further substantiation and analysis and it has remained unpublished. While I was unaware of Bhaumik's D. Phil. in 2005, I went on to cite him in my subsequent articles as an example of research that does recognize the breadth and complexity of Bombay cinema. I see his enterprise as one that complements and parallels my own research.

In this context, my 2005 essay on Fearless Nadia and the Wadias, as published in Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha's *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens* (2005), did challenge an orthodoxy within published academic work at that time, while the edited collection as a whole set the stage for a way of framing Indian cinema through the transnational that was to become more important as the decade progressed.

## **2011**

By 2011 there was an explosion of writing on Indian cinema, with four major journals now devoted to its study: *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies*, *Journal of South Asian Popular Culture*, *Studies in South Asian Film and Media* and *Journal of the Moving Image*. Through these, a wider network of scholars began publishing in the field. Moreover, interest in the topic had spread across a range of disciplines, from film and cinema studies to cultural studies, comparative literature, anthropology and South Asian studies.

The Bollywood moniker and accompanying interest in global and transnational flows was now well established, with titles ranging from Rajinder Dudrah's *Bollywood: Sociology Goes to the Movies* (2006) to Amit Rai's *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage* (2009), Anustup Basu's *Bollywood in the Age of New Media: The Geo-televisual Aesthetic* (2010) and Ashish Rajadhyaksha's *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency* (2009), as well as several edited collections: Sujata Moorti and Sangita Gopal's *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance* (2008), Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (eds.) *The Bollywood Reader* (2008) and Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (eds.) *Global Bollywood* (2008). Of these, only Basu's book paid any attention to the historical B- and C-grade movies, and that only in passing.

Ravi Vasudevan's *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* did engage with the notion of different circuits and audiences, with a section on 'differentiated film publics' (2010: 296-299), but most of the book is devoted to developing his earlier work on 1950s melodrama (primarily socials and devotionals),

while extending these interests to a broader range of popular, art cinema and documentary traditions, exploring issues of film form and style, audiences, technology and genre.

Both Priya Jaikumar's *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (2006), and Ranjani Mazumdar's *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (2007) moved the focus firmly away from the nation, albeit in different ways. Jaikumar's project explored the intertwined histories of British imperial and Indian colonial film cultures of the 1930s and 1940s, challenging the framework of national cinemas that had dominated Indian cinema studies. She did engage with a range of 'lower' genres, including briefly the Wadias' films, although the overall focus was on the more 'respectable' films and film studios. Mazumdar's book, on the other hand, turned to questions of spatiality and the urban, looking at Bombay cinema's historical and contemporary relationship to the city in the context of globalization and consumption. Her argument concentrated on the films of the A-circuits.

Two authors broke the mold and engaged head-on with stunt films and stunt stars, and were therefore particularly relevant to my own research. Valentina Vitali's *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies* (2008) challenged the emphasis on socials, tracing the historical trajectory of the action film as a significant component of popular Hindi cinema, with two chapters devoted to the 1920s' and 1930s' stunt films, including those of the Wadia brothers and Fearless Nadia. Neepa Majumdar's *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s to 1950s* (2009) explored stardom across a range of genres, including stunt films and Fearless Nadia. However, both these books were published later than my three essays on Nadia and the Wadias (chapters 3, 4 and 5) and neither engages with B-circuit fantasy films, which were by then becoming the focus of my work. In fact, by the late 2000s, Fearless Nadia, far from being ignored, had become a fixture of almost any account of 1930s Bombay cinema and a veritable cliché of popular, journalistic accounts, most of these citing Riyad's 1993 film, Wenner's book and my own published work. Mihir Bose's *Bollywood* (2006) is one of the better examples, but draws exclusively on secondary sources, primarily my own and Wenner's work on

Nadia. It also fails to acknowledge my original writing on Nadia in 1991, which predated even Riyad's professional interest in the topic.

Two other books did move into the territory of the B-circuit fantasy film, and provided the main context for the new developments in my research and writing. Rachel Dwyer's *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* was the first to acknowledge 'the Islamicate film' as a category, devoting a chapter to this (2006: 97-131) and including a page or so on the fantasy film. Dwyer continued to champion films and film histories outside the Bollywood mainstream with her co-edited collection *Beyond the Boundaries of Bollywood* (2011), in which she published my 'Distant Voices' essay on *Lal-e-Yaman*. The first book to explore the aesthetic idioms of Islamicate forms of Bombay cinema and develop these in any detail was Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen's *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* (2009). They identified and described three key Islamicate genres – the Muslim Historical, the Muslim Courtesan film, and the Muslim Social – but added:

One crucial omission that we hope to rectify in a future edition is that we have not included here films of the 'Oriental genre', which was especially popular in the Silent and early Sound periods. (2009: xiii).

This provided a challenge and one of the key starting points for my new body of research on the B-movie fantasy film (sometimes known as 'Oriental films') and the influence of the *Arabian Nights* within Indian cinema. My chapters 1, 2 and 3 were developed primarily in the context of the gap identified by these authors.

## **2013**

In bringing this account up to 2013, the point at which *Bombay before Bollywood* was first published, I refer the reader to the book's Chapter 1, where I describe in some detail the context for the book's arguments. In brief, my concern was that despite more material than ever before being published on Bombay cinema – especially in the run up to the 2013 Indian Cinema Centenary – as well as a mushrooming of databases, wiki projects and online resources, certain histories were still being marginalized, at a time when one might have expected an opening up of

narratives. In particular, I pointed to a tendency of some mainstream scholarly accounts, such as Sangita Gopal's *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema* (2011), as well as popular journalism, to reduce the 1950s and 1960s to a monolithic form of social, with at most occasional references to mythologicals and historicals. This tendency could be traced through from the writings of Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1963; 1980) or Madhava Prasad (1998), or indeed my own work in the 1980s. Moreover, there was still a tendency for popular journalism to fall back on clichés about mythologicals as the defining origins of Indian cinema. To all this I listed scholarly exceptions in extensive footnotes throughout the book.

Since my book has come out, a much greater diversity of research and scholarship has been published, especially from a new generation of PhD scholars and post-docs at institutions in India, the UK and USA. There has been much more work on the pre- and early post-independence era, including theses that break down boundaries between 'national' cinemas and genres, for example, Salma Siddique's PhD *Between Bombay and Lahore: A Partition History of Cinema in South Asia (1940-1960)*, which I supervised, which examines Muslim socials and fantasy films from a new perspective that embraces the complexity of the 'national' in that era. Others are studying today's B- and C-circuits and 'paracinema' phenomena, with, for example, articles by Vibhushan Subba, Darshana Shreedar Mini and others that will feature in a forthcoming special issue of *Bioscope* on South Asian B-movies and soft porn. There has also been a growing body of work on B- and C-movies of other South Asian countries, including Lotte Hoek's ethnography *Cut-pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh* (2014). 'Trash' has never been so recognized or so celebrated.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Although *Bombay Before Bollywood* comprises discrete essays researched and written at different points in time and within varying conceptual frameworks, the overarching themes and arguments of the book emerged most clearly through the process of writing its introductory chapter, in which I first brought these essays together. Looking across this material from the point of view of a PhD, I see that my interventions over the years have contributed not only a body of new subject matter to scholarship on Bombay cinema history but also a gentle corrective to the analytical perspective of the mainstream discipline at various points in time. The evidence suggests that, perhaps because of my own perversity, my work has succeeded in being on the cusps of change throughout much of this period and in making its own modest contributions to such change.

As described above, the field has changed radically over the decades. My journey began in the early 1980s when there was almost no material available to the researcher, except that which she gathered herself, often slowly and painfully. My book was finally published in a world in which there is a super abundance of online and other information, from fan and cinephile websites to filmographic databases and private collections. However, resources for critical evaluation of all this material remain more limited. What skills and experience are needed to assess and make sense of all that is available at the click of a mouse? How do we train new researchers to evaluate this? What is the nature of academic labour today? What is to be valued and rewarded across the different stages of collecting, analyzing and contextualizing archival materials? Wherein does originality lie? All of these questions are still in debate.

There are many positive developments. The magnificent *indiancine.ma*, an online wiki project set up by Lawrence Liang and Ashish Rajadhyaksha, has begun to build the most comprehensive database yet on Indian cinema history, drawing on the voluntary contributions and expertise of scholars in the field. Alongside this, there is a lively new generation of well trained doctoral and post-doctoral researchers emerging from universities in India, the UK and USA, who are finding new material with which to complicate received wisdom and are addressing with gusto the gaps

that have become apparent in the work of senior scholars, including my own. In my roles as PhD supervisor and *Bioscope* journal editor, I have the privilege of engaging with these developments and mentoring and supporting new scholarship in this burgeoning and ever exciting field.

There is still a wealth of resources out there to be tapped. And there is still room for the pleasures of the serendipitous adventure – a phrase that, somewhat strangely, brings us back full circle to the Oriental tale. The English word ‘serendipity’ was coined in 1754 by Horace Walpole on the basis of his childhood memories of a “silly” Persian fairy tale (*dastaan*) in which three princes of Serendip (a magic land, today’s Sri Lanka) travelled the world “making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of...” True serendipity involves both the adventure of the unexpected and the conceptual skills, imagination and experience to make sense of what one finds. It is only fitting, given the subject matter of my research, that I discover at the end of this PhD journey that an Oriental tale has underlain the aims and ethos of my research project throughout.



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## ***Miss Frontier Mail:*** **The Film That Mistook Its Star for a Train**

ROSIE THOMAS



*We hereby inform the public that our Rail-Road Thriller, Miss Frontier Mail, has no connections whatsoever with the well-known "Frontier Mail" of the B.B. & C.I. Railway. It refers to the name of the heroine of the story and not to any train whatsoever in India.*

*Miss Frontier Mail* publicity booklet, May 1936<sup>1</sup>

Four weeks before *Miss Frontier Mail's* release in May 1936, producer J.B.H. Wadia was contacted by an angry B.B. & C.I. Railway company official complaining that he had betrayed their trust. The company had allowed Wadia's crew to film on their trains and tracks. He had rewarded them with *Frontier Mail*, a film about the dangers of rail travel, starring India's top female box-office draw, Fearless Nadia. Advertising it throughout the country with a graphic image of a train crash, a misguided publicist had added: "By kind permission of the B.B. & C.I. Railway Company". Keen to appease the railway owners but ever the opportunist, J.B.H. Wadia immediately instigated a national newspaper campaign to find a new name for the film. Thousands of suggestions flooded in from the public, from amongst which the simple addition of "Miss" to "*Frontier Mail*" seemed least likely to cause complications for a completed film awaiting imminent release.<sup>2</sup> As a tongue-in-cheek aside, the above disclaimer ran across all subsequent publicity. The film went on to become one of Wadia Movietone's top earners.

This essay explores the question: what did it mean to call Fearless Nadia “Miss Frontier Mail”? More broadly, what might it mean to call a woman a train? Moreover, how did the lure of ‘the frontier’ function in this sobriquet?

I examine *Miss Frontier Mail* – the only 1930s film of Nadia’s heyday to have survived in its entirety – to explore themes of modernity, gender and national identity. I suggest that whilst the filmmakers ostensibly chose “Frontier Mail” as the heroine’s nickname because of its connotations as the acme of speed and modernity, the notion of the frontier – as liminal zone – formed a subtext to the star persona of Nadia, and to the Wadia stunt oeuvre as a whole.

In 1936 the Frontier Mail train was the height of glamorous modernity, its name synonymous with speed, sophistication and the adventure of the railways. Launched in 1928 and upgraded with (some) air-conditioning in 1934, it was India’s most prestigious and fastest long-distance train, its 72-hour route – Bombay, Delhi, Lahore, Peshawar – unequivocally exotic.<sup>3</sup> Its brochure advertised “all the comforts of a first-class hotel”: imported iced beer on tap, an opulent dining car with continental and Indian cuisine, including its renowned chicken curry, served on meticulously laid white damask tablecloths, and free daily news bulletins telegraphed along the line direct from Reuters.<sup>4</sup> Its punctuality was legendary: Bombay folk were said to set their clocks by the arc of floodlights switched on over the B.B. & C.I. headquarters each evening to announce the safe arrival of the train. The *Frontier Mail* embodied the quintessentially modern sense of time and space of the railways, the formerly unthinkable equation between speed and distance that Schivelbusch called “the new reality of annihilated in-between spaces”<sup>5</sup>. But its name encoded much more.

Both the railways and the frontier were romantic but ambivalent signifiers in the Indian colonial imagination. The northwest frontier was a wild ‘Other’ to Bombay’s cosmopolitan modernity: a space of danger and excitement where mythically macho tribesmen had for centuries defended India against invaders.<sup>6</sup> The Frontier Mail raced from Bombay to the Afghan border and back on a daily basis, a tangible hunk of metal linking centre and periphery. As a symbolic, if poignant, evocation of the sheer size and scale of India, such a train undoubtedly helped both to imagine and to define the new nation.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the northwest frontier was a strategic outpost of the Raj, a place where colonial armies defended ‘their’ territory against the world. The very existence of the railway network and a superfast train in which functionaries of the British Raj travelled in luxury to the outposts of their empire was a sharp reminder of the colonial project and all its evils. As Kerr notes: “Railways made the Indian state and hence the Indian nation possible”<sup>8</sup>.

*Miss Frontier Mail* (dir. Homi Wadia, 1936) offers a fascinating filmic take on such ambivalence, set in motion by the playful equation between its star and the train. Our first glimpse of the heroine, Fearless Nadia, is dramatically anticipated by a comic build-up, which immediately conflates her with the Frontier Mail. “Sister! Savita! Frontier Mail!” yells her kid brother Jayant. “Are you calling a woman or a train?” retorts a buffoonish postman, who is waving a telegram he has brought for Miss Savita. When Savita finally appears, we are in little doubt as to who (or what) she might be. Flanked by the grand pillars of her

verandah, Fearless Nadia, a glamorous blonde, emerges into the upper half of the frame in her hunting gear: jodhpurs, cinched waist, frilly-shouldered blouse, beret and *bindi*, with a rifle in her hand and a pistol in her pocket. Thus begins an ongoing conflation of ideas about speed, modernity, Westernisation and the performance of 'femininity' in relation to received notions of contemporary Indian womanhood.

*Miss Frontier Mail* came just one year after the unprecedented success of *Hunterwali* (Woman with the Whip, dir. Homi Wadia, 1935), the stunt film which had launched Wadia Movietone's sensational new star, Fearless Nadia, a buxom, white-skinned, blue-eyed singer/dancer/acrobat of Australian origin, who had debuted in cabaret and circus. Based on Douglas Fairbanks' *Mark of Zorro* and integrated with the conventions of urban Parsi theatre and the developing norms of India's emergent national cinema, *Hunterwali* had been set in a Ruritanian kingdom, with Nadia playing a Robin Hood-style princess who disguised herself in mask, cloak and hot pants, brandished a whip, and rescued her kingdom's oppressed from a ruthless tyrant. *Hunterwali* ran for over 25 weeks in Bombay, became Delhi's first blockbuster, and spawned an unofficial merchandising industry of Fearless Nadia matchboxes, whips and belts.

*Miss Frontier Mail* was her second big success and, whilst capitalising on Nadia's unique star appeal, was in no simple sense a sequel. Although a recognisable ensemble of actors reappeared, and underlying story structures were similar, there were distinctive changes in setting, characters and even camera and editing style. *Miss Frontier Mail* was unambiguously set in the modern world, with Nadia playing a fashionable young woman fond of tennis, weightlifting and driving fast cars – when she wasn't out hunting in jodhpurs and jaunty beret, or genteelly sipping tea in a stylish sari on the sofa of her art deco bungalow. Whilst story, setting and structure were fully 'Indianised', the film, like its predecessor, drew overtly on popular Hollywood comedy and action serials, with Nadia billed, from *Hunterwali* onwards, as "India's Pearl White"<sup>9</sup>.

*Miss Frontier Mail* tells of the fight between Savita Devi (Fearless Nadia) – on behalf of the good people of Lalwadi – and a wicked villain (Sayani) who disguises himself as the mysterious Signal X and wreaks mayhem in the community. With his gang of "*rail ke daku*" (railway gangsters) and his vampish floozy Gulab (Gulshan), Signal X orchestrates a series of robberies and murders on the railways and then frames innocent men for the crimes. He is in fact Savita's uncle Shyamlal, and in the pay of a millionaire aeroplane company owner who wants to undermine public confidence in the railways to boost his own profits. After a series of fast-paced adventures, 'thrills', spectacular fights, murders, kidnappings, heroic rescues and a rail crash, Savita's daring and determination expose Shyamlal, who is finally shot down by police as he tries to escape in the airline tycoon's plane.

Woven through this narrative are a number of threads. There is a romance between Savita and Sunder, the railway president's charming son (Sardar Mansoor), which is

paralleled by a token, secondary romance between the rehabilitated vamp Gulab and Kishore (John Cawas), the heroic son of a reformed gang member. Well-developed comedy strands run through the film, the most important focusing on fresh-faced youth: Jayant (Jaidev) – Savita's kid brother turned amateur filmmaker – and his clown-like, banana-loving pal, Munchi Thoothi. The railway gangsters are also played for laughs: they are bumbling, rebellious incompetents who would really prefer to spend their time in drunken debauchery and song, and whose scenes provide interludes of music and comedy throughout.

Spectacular visual displays establish the Fearless Nadia persona. These include scenes of her exercising in her home gym, with a halo of blonde curls, bulging white thighs and the briefest of gym-vests; scenes of her beating up hapless *goondas* (thugs) atop moving trains; images of her modelling fashionable tennis whites as she flirts with her handsome lover in a railway signal-box; and the drama of her coolly mocking the villain when, sari-clad and indomitable, she corners and confronts him in his lair – the entire role enacted with a knowing, comic playfulness.

Paralleling the succession of scenes of Savita's heroism are others which build up the perfidy of her wicked uncle Shyamlal. He frames his own brother (her father) for a murder he has himself committed; he frames Savita's paramour Sunder, for a major rail crash he has himself engineered; he double-crosses his lover Gulab and, when she uncovers his perfidy, he callously shoots her, leaving her to die (he believes) on the railway tracks. Contrasting with Savita's risqué but ultimately moral modernity, his is a caricature of arch-modernity: he communicates with his gangsters and moll through a futuristic radio signalling system and lives in a show-house of technological excess.<sup>10</sup> But beyond these routine plot devices – the fight between good and evil, a romance between hero and heroine – the film is structured around a key opposition between speed and slowness, set in motion primarily through comedy.

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*Running for the tenth week at a stretch to crowded houses is the simplest and best way to describe the popularity of Wadia's... picture "Miss Frontier Mail". Not only has the picture gained unprecedented popularity, but the word "SPEED" seems to have been so very well ingrained in the minds of spectators that seven out of every ten persons leaving the local Lamington Talkies involuntarily exclaim: "MY GOD! WHAT SPEED!"*

*Bombay Chronicle*, 29 July 1936

In the days running up to its release on 29 May 1936, *Miss Frontier Mail* had been trailed in the *Bombay Chronicle* as the "fastest feature of Indian filmdom". "CRASHES, SMASHES, FIGHTS, DANGERS, STUNTS, ACROBATS" had all been promised for the delight of audiences at the Wadia brothers' "Speediest Diamond Thriller"<sup>11</sup>. Quite what this unseemly assault on the audience's sensibilities might have entailed, becomes apparent in the first reel.

*Miss Frontier Mail*'s opening scenes forcefully remind us how recently silent films had been in production. Using storytelling conventions of the silent era, the film begins with a

schematic, shadowy robbery and murder at Lalwadi railway station which introduces the sinister figure of Signal X. Music and costume code character (villains wear black, goodies white); there is no dialogue; and the action, much of it hazy long shots of gang members, is almost incomprehensible to an audience unused to the codes. The next scene is played as pure slapstick in the tradition of international silent comedy of the times: Jayant, Savita's kid brother, hand-cranks a camera, laughingly filming the antics of the buffoonish Munchi Thoothi who is attempting to pick bananas and falling off ladders. Only halfway through this – and almost seven minutes into the film – does any dialogue begin, as Jayant calls out: "Run here! Come quickly!" After a comic interaction between the youngsters and the bumbling postman who brings Savita (Nadia) a telegram, Savita's dramatic entry introduces a stilted, stagily theatrical scene.

It is only once Savita 'borrows' the postman's bicycle to catch the city-bound train to her father's disciplinary hearing that the visual style becomes more fluid – as if audiences needed to be gently inducted on the cinematic journey towards faster-paced conventions. Parallel action is now convincingly intercut for suspense. Savita a.k.a "Frontier Mail" swerves along on the postman's bicycle, whooping her trademark "Hey-y-y" whilst slapstick vignettes anticipate – then follow – the havoc she causes on her way, sending people, ladders, chickens and fruit-baskets flying. Crosscut with this, the Frontier Mail train makes its way in to the station: the minute-by-minute race against time neatly condensed through shots of the moving train reflected in a ticking station clock, intercut with close-ups of train wheels, puffing engine, railway tracks and suchlike.

These first 12 minutes effectively establish the film's mode as comedy, set up a self-referential discourse about cinema itself, and introduce speed as the film's key obsession. "My God! What speed!" is a not unreasonable response to the film's multiple layers. On a literal level the film's first words ("Run here! Come quickly!") set the agenda, as does much of its surface imagery – frenetic activity, careering bicycles, clocks and hurtling trains. At a metaphorical level, identification of Savita/Nadia with both whirlwinds (*toofan*) and trains sets up a motif that will recur. Speed is also encoded within the film's visual style through fast crosscutting and the accelerated pace of tension and suspense. And at its core the film is a balancing act between tight linear narrative and a looser comedy track, much of which itself revolves around an opposition between 'speed' and 'slowness'.

The linear structure is conventionally well crafted. The film develops through three acts of almost equal length (around 50 minutes each).<sup>12</sup> Through and against this classic narrative, and cushioning the 'thrills' of the main action, runs a meandering, surreal, non-linear thread: a beautifully developed comedy track, with absurdist digressions on the subject of bananas. Munchi Thoothi, "Champion Banana Master", is a good-natured, apparently dim-witted, clown-like youth with droopy moustache and shaven head, from the front of which arises an absurd *choti* (single tuft of long hair on a shaven head), at times improbably erect, at others sadly flaccid, parodying the tonsure of traditionalist, orthodox Hindu males. Munchi Thoothi is Jayant's "*bhola-bhala dost*", his "innocent friend", green

about the gills, laconic, vulnerable, the classic ingénue of silent comedy. In this fast-paced world Munchi Thoothi is the only person who takes his time. Slow in all senses of the word, he is a low-tech non-rationalist who is obsessed with bananas, synonymous in popular Hindi parlance with valuelessness.<sup>13</sup>

Savita's two companions pop up with their film camera and bananas throughout the film, establishing and embellishing its light, comic-book mood, signalling to the viewer that this is an absurd universe, both preposterous and fun. Tempering and contextualising the patent excessiveness of Nadia's playful heroism, their interventions defuse her potential sophistication, toughness and erotic charge. But behind their nonsense lie hints of more serious themes, including an implicit lampooning of cinema and cine-voyeurism (and hence modernity). "The camera's never ready when you find a good shot"<sup>14</sup>, they rue, stumbling upon a seemingly intimate and erotic moment between Savita and Sunder in the gym, which the cinema audience has, of course, just seen. And in the film's comic coda where the two central couples, united at last, are canoodling in the grass, the amateur filmmakers turn up again, gleefully preparing to capture these indiscretions on camera – only to be frogmarched off by Savita and Sunder's indulgent fathers, leaving the love-birds to parody a screen kiss for the cinema audience: teasingly concealed, of course, in the film's final moment.

Jayant and Munchi Thoothi's antics are neatly interwoven with the action, at times even driving plot development. Where trains, cameras and "Miss Frontier Mail" speed things up, bananas cause a fatal delay in this frantic universe.<sup>15</sup> Where Savita is 'fast', worldly-wise and erotically charged, Munchi Thoothi is 'slow', innocent and ambiguously sexual. Where Savita is associated with the hard, shiny phallic tools of guns and trains, Munchi Thoothi's world comprises soft bananas and a floppy quiff.

I began by asking what it might mean to call a woman a train and, in particular, to call Fearless Nadia "Miss Frontier Mail". Most obviously, Fearless Nadia/Savita is as fast as the Frontier Mail, India's speediest train, and hence as modern: speed becomes a gloss for modernity.<sup>16</sup> Beyond this, other similarities, perhaps frivolously, suggest themselves: both woman and train were glamorous stars of 1930s Bombay (the train's nightly arrival literally illuminated the city skyline); both performed extraordinary physical feats (agility, strength and speed respectively); both had Western origins and European associations; and both travelled from centre to periphery and back again (Nadia spent her formative teenage years and much of her twenties in the northwest frontier region). Furthermore, the equation constructs Nadia as not just exciting and desirable, but 'hard', 'hot', 'steamy' – sexual innuendo which recalls the psychoanalytic commonplace through which trains and fetishistically attired women become dream-work substitutions for the phallus.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Nadia is firmly in control of Westernised technology – she rides the trains' roofs, drives cars, shoots guns.

But there are other associations within the Indian colonial context. The ambivalent appeal of the railways and, by extension, of Westernised modernity itself – a key theme of

nationalist debate – echoes the ambivalent appeal of Nadia. I have discussed elsewhere how the Wadia brothers negotiated Nadia's European origins to produce her, through a process of mimicry in reverse, as a nationalist, Indian heroine.<sup>18</sup> She was 'not quite white' – and also 'not quite (Pearl) White'. Her 'white' European origins, simultaneously recognised and disavowed, undoubtedly fed the ambivalent frisson of her erotic appeal in the classic colonial miscegenation fantasy. She was India's own Hollywood star, India's unapologetic, droll appropriation of Pearl White's potent global brand.<sup>19</sup>

But Fearless Nadia was a liminal figure in more ways than one. Throughout *Miss Frontier Mail*, jocular male banter repeatedly questions her womanhood. Just after Savita has pummelled an office full of railway clerks to pulp, a bewildered *babu* puns: "She came like Toofan Mail, fought like Punjab Mail and left at the speed of wind like Frontier Mail"<sup>20</sup>. Savita is as speedy as the Toofan Mail and as combative as a Punjabi male. She is simultaneously Miss Frontier Mail, a super-fast train, and Miss Frontier Male, a woman on the borderline/frontier of masculinity.

For more than three-quarters of her screen time Savita wears 'masculinised' outfits. She is physically active, fights energetically and does bodybuilding in her home gym. Moreover, her image is boldly sexualised: she exposes more flesh than any other screen heroine – or vamp – and can cartwheel half-naked from her gym-horse into the arms of the fiancé she has herself chosen, without detracting from her moral authority at the centre of the film. Whilst such freedoms are conventionally the prerogative of the male domain, there is a precedent for independent, sexually assertive womanhood in India's historical and legendary cross-dressing warrior women known as '*viraangana*'. When the British censored overt references to the Independence movement after 1910, historical figures such as Lakshmibai, Queen of Jhansi, became the focus for nationalist activism, enthusiastically celebrated in popular theatre, early cinema and calendar art. The Nadia persona with its masculinised dress, sexual freedom and celebration of both physical and moral strength neatly reworks what Hansen memorably dubs "this startling counter-paradigm" of Indian womanhood.<sup>21</sup>

The Wadias constructed in Nadia a *viraangana* for a modern world, a *viraangana* who is also a train, a *viraangana*-on-wheels. Nadia thereby bridges Western modernity and Indian traditionalism. The key to Nadia's appeal lies in her fluidity: male/female; white/not quite white; Pearl White/not quite Pearl White; modern woman/traditional warrior; the speediness of modern technology/a playful comic character. She is a canvas across which multiple identities can be played to forge a new modern Indian femininity. With the film itself tempering the appeal of speed with comedic slowness, the signifiers of Westernised modernity become reworked as distinctively Indian.

Wadia brothers' stunt films starring Fearless Nadia, (mostly) directed by Homi and written and produced by Jamshed (J.B.H.) Wadia, were the biggest earners of the mid- to late 1930s. Costing an unprecedented Rs 1.25 lakh, *Miss Frontier Mail* recouped almost double that on first release,<sup>22</sup> running for 14 weeks at its first-run Bombay theatre before doing the



rounds of lower-class cinemas. Even into its fourth week in Delhi it boasted needing 50 policemen to control unruly crowds.<sup>23</sup>

Histories of Indian cinema invariably celebrate 1936 as the year Bombay Talkies released *Achhut Kanya* and changed the course of Indian cinema history.<sup>24</sup> New Theatres' *Devdas* (1935), which established the maudlin romantic hero for decades to come, was also still running, whilst Prabhat's *Sant Tukaram*, a devotional about the legendary *bhakti* singer/saint, was heralded for its 'authentic' traditionalism. Whilst all were undoubtedly landmark films and indeed successful at the box office, they were also heavily hyped by the highbrow critics and bourgeois papers whose ideals they reflected.

In fact, a wide range of films was released in 1936. More than half were stunt, action and costume films. Heavyweight social melodramas and devotionals were in a distinct minority. Moreover, judging by advertisements in the *Bombay Chronicle*, fighting women were everywhere that year. A young Mehboob Khan directed *Deccan Queen*, a full-scale stunt film, for Sagar Movietone, starring a cheated but feisty heiress battling against her kingdom's evildoers. India's entry to the 1936 Venice film festival was V. Shantaram's *Amar Jyoti* (Eternal Light). Billed as "the story of Rebel Womanhood" and featuring fights and swordplay in a colourful Ruritanian seaport kingdom, it starred Durga Khote as "a ruthless pirate...and yet a loving mother"<sup>25</sup>. Elsewhere Sulochana, the superstar of the silent era, promised alluringly: "I am coming to loot the rich and help the poor, I am wildcat of Bombay," with her 1936 sound remake of *Bambai ki Billi* (Wildcat of Bombay), in which she played eight roles including policeman, pickpocket, Hyderabad gentleman and European blonde.<sup>26</sup> Even historical films touted spectacular action sequences and valiant female warriors: Ajit Movietone's *Sultana Chand Bibi*, trumpeted as "Glowing Romance of an Amazon – Queen of the Deccan", was based on a real 16<sup>th</sup>-century queen who died in battle resisting Mughal capture.<sup>27</sup>

Reading J.B.H. Wadia's unpublished memoirs – and most discussion of Nadia to date – one might be forgiven for thinking that this was the *Hunterwali* effect. Whilst *Hunterwali* undoubtedly firmly established action women within the talkie film, the *viraangana* motif had long been in vogue in silent cinema. The Wadias did not invent the masked fighting cinema heroine, nor was Nadia their first. Their own prototype for Fearless Nadia was Padma, a petite, beautiful Bengali star cast as a masked, whip-cracking saviour of the people in their *Dilruba Daku* (The Amazon, dir. Homi Wadia, 1933)<sup>28</sup>, another *Mark of Zorro* remake and the brothers' last silent film.

But even in 1933, Padma was not alone. A sword-fighting, jodhpur- and boot-clad Ermeline (a.k.a. Patty Cordoza) starred in *Azaad Abla* (Daring Damsel, 1933) at the Super cinema that June.<sup>29</sup> Ads in *Mouj Majah* invited viewers to see her "*parakram*"<sup>30</sup> and gushed, "Hands which embraced her beloved now hold a sword to fight tyranny and avenge her father..." It ran for over two months. Nor was this recent. In 1931 the same actress was the active heroine of *Toofani Taruni* (Cyclone Girl) and *Golibar* (Avenging Angel), whilst Indira/Miss Paterson played *Bijli* (Miss Lightning). Not only were these both Anglo-



Indian/European actresses, but their films' titles suggest that *Miss Frontier Mail*'s equation between speed and modern womanhood was by no means so original. In fact, newspapers reveal that a plethora of active, booted females – many of them European or Anglo-Indian – had been hitting the Indian silent screen since at least 1925.<sup>31</sup>

Curiously, whilst J.B.H.'s writings reveal nothing of this local tradition, he always enthusiastically acknowledged his debt to his Hollywood heroes, whose material he so skilfully 'Indianised'. Throughout the 1920s both he and Homi had been avid fans of the American fare that filled 85% of Indian silent screen time: comedies, thrillers, westerns – Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Douglas Fairbanks. Particular favourites were the 'daring misses' of Hollywood's action serials: Pearl White, Ruth Roland, Helen Holmes.<sup>32</sup> The Wadias' half-dozen silent films between 1928 and 1933 were frank adaptations of Hollywood, notably Douglas Fairbanks' 'thrillers'. *Toofan Mail* (dir Homi Wadia, 1932), "India's first 100% railroad thriller" and an overnight success, was directly inspired by Helen Holmes' railroad serials, and in turn inspired *Miss Frontier Mail*. But even filming a railroad movie on location in India was innovative, as J.B.H. recalls in amusing anecdotes of *Toofan Mail*'s youthful crew and their hair-raising antics on the roofs and tracks of moving suburban Bombay trains.<sup>33</sup>

As sons of a respectable Parsi shipbuilding family, the Wadias' success as small-scale, stunt film producers for the C-grade circuit in the silent era had been mildly scandalous. Setting up Wadia Movietone in 1933, they temporarily abandoned the stunt genre for more 'respectable' Parsee theatre-inspired musical 'costume' dramas. *Lale-Yaman* (1933), their talkie debut, boasted classical songs and dances in an Arabian Nights milieu. But with *Hunterwali*'s phenomenal 1935 box-office success, a return to stunt films became irresistible. Alongside Nadia's 'Diamond Thriller' series were jungle films (Indian Tarzans), *daku* (dacoit/bandit) adventures and animal spectacles featuring performing horses and dogs. Advertisements of the day, even in upmarket English-language papers, sold the films as unabashed popular entertainment: "Wadia films spell speed and mean entertainment"<sup>34</sup>. *Hind Kesri*, an "animal thriller" starring trained horse "Punjab ka Beta (Son of Punjab)", brazenly targeted children of the snobbish bourgeois classes: "Serious subjects, my dear children, are for your parents. Let them see for themselves romances and tragedies... YOU... come and see me... and boast before your parents that of the entire family you were the most entertained"<sup>35</sup>. By the end of the decade Wadia Movietone was the most profitable studio in Bombay, releasing six or seven films a year, the majority aimed at the mass audience.

Although defiantly proud of his successful stunt films, J.B.H. Wadia, a qualified lawyer and cultured intellectual, was deeply upset by the derision he encountered from industry grandees. In later years he pointed out that "almost all Wadia Movietone films in the 1930s were woven around themes of political and social value", maintaining that "my much derided stunt films contained more progressive ideas in them than most of the so-called social films which have been successful mainly because of their reactionary ideology"<sup>36</sup>. Nadia's films did indeed tackle, amongst other things, Hindu-Muslim unity (*Lootaru Lalna*, 1938), caste iniquities (*Hurricane Hansa*, 1937) and women's education (*Diamond Queen*, 1940), reflecting J.B.H.'s

involvement with former Marxist M.N. Roy's radical humanist movement. *Miss Frontier Mail* is one of the few that doesn't wear its politics on its sleeve, although a critique of greedy capitalists, passing references to the nationalist movement, and an allegorical subtext, are easily uncovered. But its most "progressive ideas" emerge primarily through the film's formal structuring, reflecting the Wadias' own perspectives on modernity and national identity, situated as they were at the borders, not the centre, of the nationalist project.

Whilst Homi was always the pragmatic populist, Jamshed was torn between two visions of Indian modernity. Like the Congress intellectuals, he supported humanist social reform and celebrated Indian traditional arts; but he also understood market forces and saw that popular passions would be the seeds for new modern Indian identities, and that these could not be neatly imposed from above. Both brothers valued aspects of the West that bourgeois intellectuals dismissed as trash, as well as subaltern Indian entertainment forms. They saw no contradiction in forging an Indian modernity that embraced global popular culture.<sup>37</sup> Where Nehru et al. 'improvised' a modernity grounded in a notionally ur-Indian tradition, the Wadias offered a different solution to the ambivalence of Westernised modernity.<sup>38</sup> Valuing the pleasures and potential of comedy and visceral thrills, and playing these with skill, their films developed from – and built on – the vibrant eclecticism of India's by then disparaged silent cinema and early theatre. Moreover, the Wadias discreetly parodied their critics.

"You really *are* Miss 1936", Sunder admiringly exclaims when Savita insists on driving off alone in her convertible to meet a gangster, with only her muscles, wits and trusty pistol to protect her. Not only was this shorthand for sophisticated, modern, urban womanhood, but also presumably a wry allusion to *Miss 1933* (dir. Chandulal Shah, 1933), a recently successful social melodrama starring her rival, Glorious Gohar. Such socials dealt largely through melodramatic pathos with problems of a modernising India, particularly the stresses placed on gender roles and modern marriages. The Wadias' modernisation comedy appears to gently lampoon the modernisation melodrama as well as offering its own take on Hollywood, using 'speed' – 'the watchword of this generation' and a key synonym for modernity – as its central term.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, in the same month and paper as *Miss Frontier Mail* was being advertised for its 'speed', *Amar Jyoti* was praised by a *Bombay Chronicle* critic for its "slow tempo of dialogue, music..."<sup>40</sup>

*Miss Frontier Mail* is of course overtly about Westernised modernity: full of images of railways, aeroplanes, radio communication, bridges, speed and technological gizmos of a modern world – as well as images of filmmaking itself. It also uses accomplished special effects, technological wizardry and stunts to enhance its illusions and make us believe the impossible. It displays evidence – or a utopian fantasy – of women's newfound independence, confidence and mobility, with modern choices of clothes and leisure activities (tennis, gymnastics, hunting); whilst its storyline critiques Westernised capitalist greed and celebrates community.

However, the film reflects and engages with modernity more profoundly. As a 'thriller' whose pleasures depend heavily on emotional excitement and the visceral appeal of its action-packed tension – scaring, shocking, exhilarating its audiences – it echoes all that is deemed thrilling and exciting about modern city life itself, inducing the state of heightened awareness which Singer terms "hyperstimulation"<sup>41</sup>. Where the socials engage with issues around modernity as 'themes' within convoluted, melodramatic storylines, as well as through music and dance, *Miss Frontier Mail* deals with modernity head-on, through experiential engagement with its very form, at the same time crucially tempering its thrust with self-parodic humour that reflects Indian topical concerns and traditional entertainment forms.

Whilst the mainstream Bombay film industry increasingly wanted to close off pernicious Western and Islamic influences to celebrate an invented traditionalism within a Hindu ethos,<sup>42</sup> the Wadias' modernity recognised the fluidity and hybridity of identities within the porous borders of a modern India in a transnational context. Drawing eclectically on global and Indian popular culture, their films offered an inclusive, hybrid, ludic space, within which Hollywood could be appropriated and redefined, and the pieties of the Indian mainstream lampooned in a feast of visceral exuberance.

Gandhi famously rejected Westernised modernity – notably the twin evils of speed and the railways. "Good travels at a snail's pace – it can therefore have little to do with the railways..." he proclaimed provocatively in 1908.<sup>43</sup> The Wadias embraced Westernised modernity (and transnational popular culture) warmly, but reconfigured its ambivalent appeal on their own terms. They built in Nadia a potent fantasy of power and control within modernity: a *viraangana*-on-wheels, an all-Indian warrior woman, Hollywood action serial queen, sari-clad Hindu daughter and knowingly preposterous comic-book heroine all rolled into one.

## Notes

1. An introductory title on the film itself reads: "NOTE: MISS FRONTIER MAIL SHOULD NOT BE CONFUSED IN ANY WAY WITH THE FRONTIER MAIL OF THE B.B. & C.I. RAILWAY COMPANY".
2. Riyad Wadia, 1994: programme notes for screenings of *Miss Frontier Mail*. Personal correspondence, quoted courtesy of Wadia Movietone archive.
3. There had been fierce competition on this route, especially between G.I.P. (Great India Peninsular) Railway's Punjab Mail and B.B. & C.I. (Bombay, Baroda and Central India) Railway's earlier trains. The Frontier Mail, launched on 1 September 1928, finally reduced the 2,320-kilometre journey to a mere 72 hours, a day or so shorter than its rivals.  
Further anecdotal details at <http://irfca.org/~shankie/famoustrains/famtrainfrontier.htm>
4. K.R. Vaidyanathan. *150 Glorious Years of Indian Railways* (English Edition Publishers, 2003, Mumbai), p. 24. However, such luxury was reserved for first-class passengers. Its six carriages carried 450 people and included second- and third-class coaches. Nevertheless, its romantic aura made it a favourite with honeymooning couples in all classes.

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5. Wolfgang Schivelbusch. *The Railway Journey* (University of California Press, 1986, Berkeley/Los Angeles), p. 42.
6. Newspapers of the mid-1930s suggest there may have been another contemporary resonance. 'Frontier Gandhi' a.k.a. Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, was a devout Pashtun Muslim and leader of the non-violent independence movement in the Northwest Frontier Province. A close friend of Gandhi, he had refused the offer of the Congress Party presidency in 1931.
7. As Paul Theroux put it: "The railway possessed India and made her hugeness graspable". In (eds.) Michael Satow and Ray Desmond, *Railways of the Raj* (New York University Press, 1980, New York), pp. 6-7.
8. (Ed.) Ian J. Kerr, *Railways in Modern India* (Oxford University Press, 2001, Delhi), p. 56. His introductory essay summarises the complex topic of the railways and Indian nationalism. See also Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton University Press, 1999, Princeton), pp. 161-70, for discussion of the importance of the railways to the colonial project.
9. Pearl White was the most popular of Hollywood's silent stunt stars, known globally for serials such as *Perils of Pauline* (1914) and *Exploits of Elaine* (1915), all of which ran successfully in India.
10. Riyad Wadia's programme notes suggest an anti-Nazi theme was also intended here.
11. *Bombay Chronicle*, 1 August 1936.
12. Act One establishes villains and heroes: two murders are committed, an innocent man is framed and the heroes' love story begins. Act Two is built around a classic reversal structure: the heroes foil the villains' attempts to crash a train, but the villain then destroys the evidence that will incriminate his gang. The romance between hero and heroine develops, that between villain and vamp begins to flounder. In Act Three the villains succeed in engineering a train crash for which the master villain is richly rewarded; but eventually the heroes unmask and destroy him. Two romantic couples are united: hero and heroine, and second hero and reformed vamp.
13. Western modernity is understood to have emerged as a result of rationalism (science) and capitalism. Whether this is an appropriate model for Indian modernity was a point of debate in contemporary nationalist circles.
14. "Jab acchha picture milta hai tabhi camera tayyaar nahin..."
15. Their camera records the villains laying dynamite on the railway tracks, and Munchi Thoothi's banana fixation both helps and hinders the action: the villains steal a film-can containing his bananas instead of the incriminating footage, but later his unhurried enjoyment of a banana gives Signal X time to destroy that footage.
16. Throughout the film Nadia is equated with speed – not just fast trains, but whirlwinds (*toofan*), lightning, electricity. At one point her uncle introduces her: "Her nickname is Frontier Mail, that's why she reached here like lightning". In colloquial parlance, women who embrace the sexual mores of (Westernised) modernity are, of course, referred to as "fast".
17. Interestingly, the nickname that stuck, and which still endures amongst her older fans, is not *Miss Frontier Mail* but *Hunterwali* – "the woman with the whip".
18. "Not Quite (Pearl) White", in (eds.) Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha, *Bollyworld* (Sage, 2004, New Delhi), pp. 35-69.

19. See also Ashish Rajadhyaksha's discussion of her as a "spoof" of Hollywood stardom in "The Importance of Fearless Nadia", *The Times of India*, 28 January 1996.
20. "Woh ladki Toofan Mail ki tarah aayee, Punjab Mail ki tarah maar-peet karke Frontier Mail ban kar hawa ho gayee". To which he adds a further absurdist comment on modernity's obsession with time: "Meri baneebanaayee ghadi ka satyanaash kar diya (She destroyed my clock which I had just repaired)".
21. Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play* (University of California Press, 1992, Berkeley), pp. 188-98. My "Not Quite (Pearl) White" essay (op. cit.) develops this argument at length in relation to Fearless Nadia and *Diamond Queen* (1940).
22. According to Riyad Wadia the production budget was an unprecedented Rs 1,25,000; and Wadia wrote to his technicians, "... spare no efforts in your pursuit of innovation and creativity". It recouped Rs 2,25,000 on first release, and by 1951 had been re-released nine times.
23. *Hindustan Times*, 19 June 1936.
24. See for example Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (Oxford University Press, 1980, Oxford), pp. 101-2; or Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (Routledge, 2002, New York/London).
25. *Bombay Chronicle*, 7 August 1936. There were, of course, many differences between the Fearless Nadia persona and Durga Khote's pirate queen, which I elaborate elsewhere. See also Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire* (Duke University Press, 2006, Durham/London), pp. 218-25.
26. *Bombay Chronicle*, 15 January 1936. Details in (eds.) Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), pp. 232, 248.
27. *Bombay Chronicle*, 7 August 1936.
28. In the silent era films were commonly given both English and Hindi titles.
29. *Hunterwali* released at the same Super cinema two years later.
30. In Gujarati, "achievement/bravery/stunts". *Mouj Majah*, 20 August 1933.
31. This had been a mainstay of Parsee theatre. See Kathryn Hansen, "Making Women Visible", in (ed.) Selvy Thiruchandran, *Women, Narration and Nation* (Vikas Publishing House, 1999, New Delhi), pp. 22-48. See also Kaushik Bhaumik, *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry*, D.Phil thesis submitted to University of Oxford, 2001.
32. For a good overview of the serial queen melodramas, see Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* (Columbia University Press, 2001, New York), pp. 59-99.
33. *Looking Back on My Romance with Films*, J.B.H. Wadia's unpublished memoirs.
34. *Bombay Chronicle*, 1 August 1936.
35. *Bombay Chronicle*, 21 January 1936.
36. From *Looking Back on My Romance with Films*, op. cit.
37. Although unaware of it at the time, in their championing of Hollywood's so-called 'low genres', the Wadias were in good company: the European avant-garde and surrealists were similarly captivated.
38. For an argument on the "improvisation" of Indian modernity, see Sudipta Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India", in *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, Issue 1, pp. 152-54 (Winter 2000).



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39. Another example of such parody is the film's comic coda in which the comedians try to film the lovers' final kisses. Given that the debate on mouth-to-mouth kissing was still highly topical – in 1932 there had been the scandal of Zubeida's 86 kisses in *Zarina* and, in 1933, Devika Rani's famous on-screen kiss in *Karma* – this was undoubtedly a knowing snub to the bourgeoisie.
40. *Bombay Chronicle*, 8 July 1936.
41. Ben Singer, op. cit., pp. 90-99. The film also offers the "fascination and terror" of the pleasure of the speed of the railways, as Lynne Kirby, via Schivelbusch, argues in relation to Hollywood silent films in *Parallel Tracks* (Duke University Press, 1997, Durham).
42. See Ravi Vasudevan, 'The Politics of Cultural Address in a 'Transitional' Cinema', in (eds.) Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, *Rethinking Film Theory*, (Arnold, 2000, London), pp. 156-57. See also Kaushik Bhaumik, op. cit.
43. M.K. Gandhi. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Natal, 1910; Reprint Navajivan Karyalaya, 1938, Ahmedabad), p. 47.





# TEXTS AND MARGINS